

Book Review

Theodore P. Letis, *The Ecclesiastical Text*, Philadelphia: The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 1997.

The Ecclesiastical Text is a collection of essays by Theodore P. Letis, written while he was doing research for the Ph.D degree at the University of Edinburgh, and previously published in various academic and popular journals.

According to his foreward, in *The Ecclesiastical Text* Letis hopes to add intellectual vigor to the current discussion on modern Bible translations. Subtitled “Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind,” *The Ecclesiastical Text* bemoans a consumer-driven Bible industry more concerned with readability and political correctness than in being true to the original texts. He especially deplores the stealthy transition in Zondervan’s The New International Version toward gender equality, noting that media mogul Rupert Murdoch now owns the venerable publishing company.

Whenever Letis mentions the NIV, and he finds occasion in most of these essays, it is always as an example of the profit-driven Bible industry. An example is this paragraph from Letis’ review of a new publication of Tyndale’s New Testament translated from the Greek by William Tyndale.

Contrasting the loftiness of Tyndale’s work with that of the modern publisher, Letis writes:

The supreme example of their work is the translation that did not blush to make bold in its earliest advertising claims to be the beginning of a new Tradition in the history of the English Bible. This was a deliberate disowning of the Renaissance Bible tradition to make way for the corporate boardroom Bible. Though it was given life by the Zondervan Corporation, the New International Version then fell into the hands of Harper and Row Publishers as a result of a corporate take-over. This company was, in turn, taken over by Rupert Murdoch. He is the noted publisher of (among other things) the British daily paper *The Sun*,

notorious for its nude pin-ups. Such is the modern world of the designer Bible (213).

By “the ecclesiastical text” Letis means the Bible as sacred text, the verbally inspired word of God. He asserts that the Bible’s sacredness has been lost as it has become a religious text (96). That shift began with Erasmus, who reintroduced an emphasis upon the Greek text instead of the Latin text. The shift to the Greek text was followed by an ever-growing emphasis upon finding the original Greek text, which was firmly cemented into evangelicalism by B.B. Warfield. That progression is the subject of Letis’ first essay, “B.B. Warfield, Common-Sense Philosophy and Biblical Criticism.” The focus began to shift from the infallibility of Scripture to its inerrancy, and that was only applied to the original autographs and not to the received text.

To counteract this misdirection, Letis champions the work of Brevard Childs and the canonical view of inspiration which he has articulated. Letis describes that view in his fourth chapter, “Brevard Childs and the Protestant Dogmaticians: A Window to a New Paradigm.” Letis then demonstrates that discipline in a study of John 1:18 and the question of whether the incarnate word is described as the only begotten God or the only begotten Son.

Letis quotes Childs in describing the canonical approach:

The canonical approach to text criticism applies a very different methodology in its use of the textual history in the pre-stabilization period. It does not attempt to establish a “better” text than the Masoretic, but chooses to remain with the canonical text and thus identifies the level of literature with which it is concerned. Nevertheless, this canonical approach is vitally interested in all the evidence from the recessional history of the pre-stabilization period. It simply uses the evidence in a particular manner towards achieving a particular goal, namely, the understanding of the canonical text (102).

At the same time, this discipline is not limited to dogmatic theology or, as Letis says, “believing criticism (which amounts to doing Biblical criticism with one hand tied behind one’s back)” (106).

Chapter five displays a fascinating application of the canonical method. The text is evaluated not just on the basis of what sources are the oldest, but also by what appears to be the accepted reading of the early church. Letis throws the evidence toward the use of the word “son,” which was strongly

championed by orthodoxy in its early days. He credits the recent resurgence of the variant reading to the loss of Trinitarian proof texts such as 1 John 5:7-8 and 1 Timothy 3:16 from the accepted canon (121).

Readers of this JOURNAL might be familiar with Letis from his lecture at the April 1998 Theological Conference in which he introduced yet-to-be-published research on Erasmus and the spurious version of 1 John 5:7. There are echoes of that lecture throughout this book, although the positive contributions are diminished as Letis focuses on the ensuing problems of textual criticism.

The final chapter, "The Revival of the Ecclesiastical Text and the Claims of the Anabaptists," focuses little on the Radical Reformation and is more a critique of the unmoored enthusiasm of fundamentalist movements back through the ages.

The Ecclesiastical Text is available from Letis' website: www.thetext.com.

— Greg Demmitt